DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 351 688 CS 213 574

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TITLE Monolingual Readers/Polylingual Texts: Challenges in Ethnic Literatures.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (23rd, Pittsburgh, PA, March 27-29, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Indians; Cultural Pluralism; *Females; Higher Education; *Language Role; *Poetry; *Poets; United States Literature
IDENTIFIERS *Ethnic Literature; Text Factors; Voice (Rhetoric)

ABSTRACT

Within the texts of most contemporary ethnic American literatures, but especially those of Native American women, interwoven double-voiced strands of language and physical location constantly intertwine through recordings of individual memory and experience. The poems that result from these explorations create a self inextricably linked to Native American socio-cultural and spiritual community through continual utterance of the poetic voice. Two forms of language rebellion appearing in Native American poetry (segues into and out of "Spanglish" and the use of Hopi words) reflect an attempt to preserve the ethnic and minority self, while simultaneously struggling to articulate it within the dominating alien language. The opportunity to confront a cultural and intellectual "Other" offers a unique challenge to mainstream Anglo readers, students, and interpreters of contemporary literatures that exist and indeed flourish beyond the linguistic confines of English and the dominant culture. The reader/student has the opportunity to construct a frame leading to multicultural understanding. (Three samples of poetry are attached.) (RS)

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Nancy H. Lang

# MONOLINGUAL READERS/POLYLINGUAL TEXTS: CHALLENGES IN ETHNIC LITERATURES

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# MONOLINGUAL READERS/POLYLINGUAL TEXTS: CHALLENGES IN ETHNIC LITERATURES

Before I read my paper, I'd like to set the tone by reading the final section from Native American poet Paula Gunn Allen's "Hanging Out in America" . . .

> We watch. Everywhere. Like Chinese CIA
> running laundry junks up the Mississippi, from the
> plazas
> of our past, from the kivas of our dreams:it's
> not much longer: we see the alien way empty, the
> footprints,
> disappeared. Maybe the worlds they seek are
> really empty, this time.
> "Benedito, Benedito, Benedito sea Dios.
> Los angeles cantan,
> A laban a Dios."
> I wonder if they know we're watching.
> All the time, everywhere.

Within the texts of most contemporary ethnic American literatures, but especially those of Native American women, interwoven double-voiced strands of language and physical location constantly intertwine through recordings of individual memory and experience. The poems that result from these explorations create a self inextricably linked to Native American socio-cultural and spiritual community through continual utterance of the poetic voice. As a result of these multi-braided interweavings, and in spite of living within an alien

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language, thus presupposing ongoing language interactions that differ from those of a "native" language speaker, female Native American poetic voices speak as heteroglossic, richly polyvocal and highly distinctive minority voices within the more Anglo-dominated multi-layered mainstreams of contemporary American poetry.

Those powers impacting on the voice of the ethnic poet forced to use the language of the conquerors resonate as the most distinguishing characteristic of minority poetry in general, and Native American poetry in particular. Especially if her first (and very possibly only) language is English, the Native American writer finds herself in an unusual predicament vis-a-vis both language and form. If one must use a socio-culturally alien language as one's written language, as well as one's first spoken language, then doublevoiced personal language(s) attempting to articulate the self must therefore begin to speak as the ongoing sources of complex interactive poetic tensions. Moreover, a poet articulates much of this tension by her individual choice of landscape and place within a chosen narrative (or story) form, as opposed to a lyric (or song), or a dramatic form. As a result, Native American women poets' combining of story and landscape elements within a narrative structure creates a highly individualized and distinctive statement of personal, socio-cultural, and spiritual place. In "Some Thoughts on Our Uncommon Language" Oklahoma Cherokee poet Diane Glancy describes her dilemma like this:

I have trouble with the spoken word. I talk, but often

do not have the word I want to carry the meaning. . . .
There is a word somewhere in my suitcase which is
packed for a long trip. . . . I must find that
term like a dress I know is somewhere in the luggage, but
with
difficulty open the grip & take out the word I need for our
conversation. . . . Words are packed tightly in there.
I do not like to get them out. . . .

Two forms of language rebellion appearing in Native American poetry reflect this attempt to preserve the ethnic and minority self, while simultaneously struggling to articulate it within the dominating alien language. Clear examples of this rebellion appear when the Laguna Pueblo/ Sioux poet Paula Gunn Allen occasionally segues in and out of Spanglish, a "quasi-known" language for English-dominated readers; and Hopi poet Wendy Rose in her later poems uses words from a language completely unknown to her average reader. While on the one hand Paula Gunn Allen's Spanglish shuts out English-speaking readers to some extent, on the other hand it also entices them into meaningful speculations with half-familiar echoings of Romance language similarities and resonances. Thus, readers can infer meanings, experiment, and actively interact with the text itself. This interaction intensifies when one reads, rather than hears, the poem, because the "frozen," printed text allows more time for intellectual play to occur. On the other hand, Rose's Hopi words render non-Hopi readers mute, by completely exiling them from signification, and at the same time pointing toward and preserving intact the secret

messages of the unknown signifier. Whenever she uses the Hopi language, Rose politely offers her readers a one-word English translation that provides a window into meaning; but Rose cannot supply those complex, stratified overlayerings of subtle nuance that a first-language Hopi reader would bring to the poem.

Thus, while Allen to some extent invites the reader to engage in an interactive dialogic "play" with Spanglish, Rose's use of Hopi rigorously limits and thereby more tightly controls the reader's response. Moreover, Rose's decision to speak in a Hopi voice also plays an ironic and subtle Trickster-like linguistic joke on readers who know only the voice of the master discourse. As a result, non-Hopi readers, especially English-dominated Anglos, may thus experience a slight taste of how it feels to be forced into functioning within a language frame of discourse that makes no sense.

Minority poets who choose to use languages other than English are not expressing affectation or hostility. Rather, by using a "foreign" language, a poet may be choosing to speak to the reader within a double-voiced subtext, as well as the surface text, thereby creating a stress requiring her reader to respond with a shock of familiar recognition, to miss meaning completely, or to struggle for nuance and understanding. At the same time, unfamiliar languages also imply important and special secrets, hidden knowledge, and private meanings to those inside the language group. In short, a poet's decision to use a "foreign" language, just like a decision to use an "exotic" setting, often becomes an ideological statement, because it

implies not only language articulation and accuracy, but also cultural authenticity and pride.

Using a "foreign" language also issues an overt cultural and linguistic statement to mute (and muted) readers. Patricia Yaeger sees this linguistic demand for freedom as a two-pronged articulation through "subversive multivoicedness." First, use of a second language forces a direct and challenging "interruption" in the flow of the dominant discourse. Second, again by forcing the creation of space in which to develop what is unspoken into speech, use of the "foreign" language "signalize(s) what is repressed as signifiable content in women's lives" (37). More specifically, in her "Preface" to Borderlands: La Frontera (1987) Chicana writer and editor Gloria Anzaldua describes her own multi-language code changes involving English, Castillian Spanish, North Mexico and Tex-Mex Spanish, and Nahuatl as "a language of the Borderlands . . . [where] at the juncture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized; they die and are born" (n.p.).

Like other minorities and ethnic groups within the United States, Native Americans always have and still must constantly struggle against implicit and overt Anglo-supremacist, culturally genocidal practices within the ideologically dominant and dominating culture. One of the most common and at the same time safest methods of preserving oneself and one's culture is to linguistically preserve important parts of the culture from the dominating group by disguising, hiding, or otherwise codifying knowledge under the shelter of an unknown language. For ethnic

American writers, the overt written use of one's own language also means that one foregrounds constructs pointing toward secrets, toward meanings and codes that are hidden and therefore preserved, although known to, the outside and now excluded dominant culture.

This opportunity to confront a cultural and intellectual "Other" offers a unique challenge to mainstream Anglo readers and interpreters of contemporary literatures that exist and indeed flourish beyond the linguistic confines of English and the dominant culture. Whether she reads a text that reflects an African-American dialect, Spanglish, a Native American language, or a recently "imported" language such as Vietnamese, an Anglo reader shut out from a linguistically ethnic secret must choose either to skip over the unfamiliar and therefore ignore the unknown, or to struggle with unfamiliar sounds, unknown textual references, and alien concepts. If a reader chooses the latter, she faces frustration; but she also has the opportunity to construct a frame leading to multicultural understanding.

SAMPLES . . .

I. From Paula Gunn Allen's "Hanging out in America," Coyote's Daylight Trip. Albuquerque: La Confluencia, 1978. 49.

. . . We watch. Everywhere. Like Chinese CIA
running laundry junks up the Mississippi, from the plazas
of our past, from the kivas of our dreams: it's
not much longer: we see the alien way empty, the footprints,
disappeared. Maybe the words they seek are
really empty, this time.
"Benedito, Benedito, Benedito sea Dios.
Los angeles cantan,
A laban a Dios."
I wonder if they know we're watching.
All the time, everywhere.

II. From Wendy Rose's "Looking Toward Home the First Time: Hopi Reservation, Arizona," What Happened when the Hopi Hit New York. New York: Contact II, 1982. 4-5.

. . . and out of my left eye
stealing steadily moment by moment
the village itself
stone and salmon-pink adobe
sucking up the sunset
into its broad lips
Kiatskomovi [Hopi village and seat of tribal government]
Hotevilla [Hopi village where my father lives]
Hopitutskwa ["Hopi Country"]
uh-uh-kwa ["Bones"]

III. From Diane Glancy's "Some Thoughts on Our Uncommon Language." Offering. Duluth: Holy Cow!, 1988. 38-39.

I have trouble with the spoken word. I talk, but often
do not have the word I want to carry the meaning. . . .
There is a word for them somewhere in my suitcase which is
packed for a long trip. . . . I must find that
term like a dress I know is somewhere in the luggage, but with
difficulty open the grip and take out the word I need for our
conversation. . . . Words are packed tightly in there.
I do not like to get them out. . . .

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